

ELMS and Critical Mass

Farmers.

Next time you are out there calving a cow, or unblocking the combine, or whatever, ask yourself: “Who is there in this parish, under the age of 40, who I could phone right now to come give me a hand?”

UK ag is sleepwalking into a critical mass crisis. It should be in every farmers top three of the issues facing the industry.

Defra

You like surveys. Here’s one for you to conduct. Of the 9000 rural parishes in England, how many now have no independent, full time farming business registered in them? Compared to, say, 30 years ago.

In many ways the greatest ‘public good’ delivered by farming isn’t farming itself, but farmers. From snow clearance to footpath maintenance, from spending money in the village shop to putting bums on seats in the village school, you could quite easily make a list of 101 ways in which farmers and farm workers maintain and enrich our countryside.

Next time Mr Monbiot gives evidence to one of your select committees, you may like to ask him how many of these ‘public goods’ his nutrition tablets will provide.

There is an opportunity with ELMS to do something that the BPS never did; support new entrants. Conversely, there is the threat that ELMS will continue to do what the BPS has done; pay significant sums of public money to large landholdings for little discernible need or benefit. Which, if nothing else, has always provided an easy hit for those wanting to portray all of agriculture as ‘feather bedded’ farmers.

ELMS is to contain a ‘new entrant support scheme’. A move for which Defra are to be applauded. However, it is a bolt-on, and like all bolt-ons it will be the first to go when the cuts come. Support for new entrants needs to be enshrined within the very structure of ELMS, to be there for as long as ELMS exists.

The SFI as it stands will pay a flat rate of £22/Ha for PP, with no upper limit. Instead it should be structured as follows:

Up to 40Ha: £220

40 – 400Ha: £22

Over 400Ha: £2

This would give a new entrant renting 100 acres of PP £9k/yr, enough to be a genuine help in getting on the first rung. UK ag needs to do this now; the clock on the critical mass crisis is ticking.